

Rockville Commission on the Environment

Issue Analysis for Mayor and Council:

Expansion of Community Gardens

Background: The City of Rockville has two community garden sites: a large site with 195 garden plots in Woottons Mill park along Hurley Avenue and a smaller site at the Senior Center. These community gardens provide our city with many benefits. They are a pleasant form of recreation, they help residents to get to know each other and they provide wholesome food. The charge for use of garden plots helps to offset the cost of maintaining the program.

Situation Analysis: The environmental benefits of gardening go beyond the community benefits set forth above. Food production in America relies on energy intensive farming practices, extensive processing and long distance shipping. Energy use could be greatly reduced by a greater reliance on local production.

Local gardening builds skills and builds soil quality that may be critical in the event of disruption to the national food system. Some aspects of our national food production system are fragile or unsustainable, such as erosion, dependence on limited seed strains, declining aquifers and finite oil supplies. This creates the potential for disruption or eventual decline. Since gardening skills and garden soil take time to build, the time to develop them is before any disruption arises. The potential for gardening is substantial. During World War II, Victory Gardens provided 40% of the nation's vegetables.

While some garden plots are still available at Wootton Mill park, gardens are more likely to be tended if they are in walking distance of your home. They are also more environmentally sound if you don't have to drive a car every time it needs watering or weeding.

We may have a greater demand for garden plots if we create a number of community gardens, with the goal of having a community garden within a half mile of most residents. The City already owns some land that may be suitable for providing additional garden plots. Another possibility is organizing garden plot loans. In garden loans, people who own suitable land can allow others to garden on their land. In return for allowing his land to be used, the City tills and marks the garden plots and installs a water faucet that the land owner doesn't have to pay the bills for. The land loaner gets to meet some neighbors and has less yard to mow. It would be completely voluntary, and the loaner can back out of the arrangement after the gardening season. This approach has worked in other cities.

It is worth noting that there is no organic community garden in Rockville. People interested in organic gardening are a large potential user group that our current community gardens don't serve. While looking to expand the number of community gardens in Rockville, we should look for an opportunity to provide garden space for those who wish to avoid synthetic herbicides and pesticides.

The new neighborhoods of Kings Farm and Falls Grove are an excellent place to consider establishing community gardens. They have new parks that are still in the planning stage, they have walkable neighborhoods in which many residents have no yard space suitable for gardening. Within established neighborhoods such as Lincoln Park and West End, there are alley right of ways that belong to the city, were never paved and are well suited to serve as garden sites for nearby residents. The differing circumstances probably call for different approaches, but the potential for positive change through community gardens is well worth pursuing.

There are many details that would need to be worked out in order to find appropriate sites and organize their implementation. Having a citizen work team look into it, similar to what was recently done with the dog park issue, could get this initiative moving. Such a team might also be kept going as an advisory committee on the model of the Bicycle Advisory Committee. This group harvests the enthusiasm of bike supporters in supporting a number of activities that improve city life. A similar gardening group could organize composting at garden sites, tool sharing, and such.

Recommendation: The Commission recommends that a citizen work team be organized to look into the best way to expand Rockville's community garden program.

Information Sources:

American Community Garden Association
Montgomery County Garden plots
City Farmer - Canada's Office of Urban Agriculture
Farm in the City, UK

<http://www.communitygarden.org>
<http://www.gardenplots.org>
<http://www.cityfarmer.org>
<http://www.farminthecity.org>